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ABSTRACT

Although anecdotal evidence supports the usefulness of peer helper programs and related training, there is little published quantitative data on the effectiveness of peer helper training. The purpose of the present study was (1) to examine whether or not training for a peer helper program provided student mediators with the essential skills needed to counsel other students, and (2) to assess the overall confidence level of the peer helper trainees. A survey was administered to peer helpers immediately before and after training. The participants came from grades 8-11 and most were from middle- to upper-class backgrounds. The questionnaire that was used provided a baseline measurement of the peer helpers' confidence levels. It was hypothesized that the peer helper training would prepare the selected students to mediate conflicts in the high school. The most important finding of the survey was the significance of the perceived value of the training program; students felt adequately prepared to be effective peer helpers. Trainees also reported increased closeness with each other following the training weekend; training helped break down misconceptions about others and enhanced students' pursuit of a common goal. (Author/RJM)

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# The Effectiveness of High School Peer Helper Training

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## Abstract

Although there has been much anecdotal evidence providing support for peer helper programs and related training, there is little published quantitative data on the effectiveness of peer helper training. The purpose of the present study was to examine whether training for a peer helper program provided student mediators with the essential skills needed to counsel other students, as well as to assess the overall confidence level of the peer helper trainees. It was hypothesized that the peer helper training would be effective in preparing the selected students to mediate conflicts in the high school. Comparison of pretest and posttest scores revealed significant changes in perceptions of program effectiveness and the cohesiveness of the peer helper group following training.

# The Effectiveness of High School Peer Helper Training

The current trend in managed care involves an increasing reliance on paraprofessional therapists. Research has shown that these paraprofessional providers' counseling efforts tend to produce results similar to those of doctoral level providers, at significantly reduced cost (Worthington, Kurusu, McCullough, & Sandage, 1996). Consistent with this, fiscally constrained secondary schools have increasingly turned to the use of paraprofessionals to address their students' psychological needs. In addition to community volunteers and graduate student interns, many high schools have instituted the use of peer helper programs. Such programs use training to develop an internal cadre of skilled student peers who are prepared to assist their fellow students with conflicts (Benson & Benson, 1993).

Due to its utility in aiding the resolution of conflicts among students and freeing school staff to perform more academic tasks, peer helping has become a popular method of dispute resolution in the 1990s (Araki, 1990; McFarland & Culp, 1992). Other pragmatic reasons for using a peer helper program are to improve school-based support for children with social/emotional/behavioral problems, to enhance prevention by shifting student norms, and to reduce the need for crisis intervention by the school's support services. Specific aims for adolescent peer helpers include building confidence, improving social skills, and promoting acceptance of others as individuals with unique strengths and weaknesses (Burrell & Vogl, 1990).

Although there has been much anecdotal evidence for the effectiveness of peer helper programs and related training, there is little published quantitative data on the effectiveness of the training programs. Therefore, an outcome

assessment measure was designed to examine whether training for a peer helpers program effectively provided student mediators with the essential skills needed to counsel other students. The overall confidence level of the peer helper trainees was also assessed. It was hypothesized that the training would be effective in preparing the selected peer helpers to mediate conflicts in the school, as operationalized by the students' responses to an assessment survey. Moreover, an increase in perceived group cohesiveness was expected after the training program.

## Method

### Subjects

A survey was administered to the peer helpers immediately before and after training. These students were selected by student and teacher nominations to be the school's first peer helpers. The participants were proportionally representative of the classes in the school (eighth to eleventh grade). Equal numbers of males and females were involved in the training. Most subjects could be classified as coming from middle to upper class backgrounds, and were demographically reflective of the school.

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to provide a baseline measurement of the peer helpers' confidence levels, as well as to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of the peer helper training session. The questionnaire included six items designed to measure the students' perceptions of their readiness for becoming a peer helper, and a section of demographic questions (Appendix). The experimenter-designed questions were examined for construct and face validity, and found to be acceptable. A number of the items' wordings were reversed to detect acquiescent response sets. A separate answer sheet was used for the

recording of each subject's responses to the questionnaire. The same general questionnaire was used for the post training measurement.

Procedure

Trainees were asked to complete the questionnaire immediately prior to their participation in the weekend training program. Although social desirability response bias was not expected to be a problem with this sample, the questionnaires were answered anonymously and individual responses remained confidential. Following completion of the pretests, the peer helpers were bussed to a remote location where they underwent a weekend-long training program under the leadership of trained peer helper adult counselors. Immediately after the completion of the training weekend and their subsequent return to the high school, the questionnaire was readministered. The sheets were then collected from each subject, and the results were compiled into a data file.

## Results

Several significant differences between scores on the pre and post training measures were noted. A t-test examining perceived effectiveness of the training weekend yielded a $t(43)=3.36$, $p<.001$, showing that the training increased the helpers' confidence. A t-test for the peer helpers' reported degree of readiness to help their peers was also significant ($t(43)=2.14$, $p<.05$). Other significant findings relevant to this research study referred to changes in the perceived closeness of the peer helpers themselves ($t(43)=2.14$, $p<.05$) and to the perception of peer helpers that were disliked and could cause problems to peer helper cohesiveness ($t(43)=-2.25$, $p<.05$).

## Discussion

It was hypothesized that the peer helper training would prepare the selected students to mediate conflicts in the high school. The results from the

peer helper training measures were statistically significant, and provide encouraging support for the effectiveness of the training program. The most important (statistically and realistically) finding was the significance of the perceived value of the training program. After spending the weekend in a highly intensive environment, the students' felt adequately prepared to be an effective peer helper. This finding was buttressed by the significance of the students' increased desire to help the student body.

Other interesting findings involved the effects of the training weekend on group cohesiveness. A number of students initially expressed some anxiety over the presence of particular students they had previously disliked, and whom they believed could pose a threat to the effectiveness of the training. However, the results indicate that the training was successful in breaking down some misconceptions commonly found in an adolescent milieu, and replacing them (at least temporarily) with focus on a common goal and accompanying constructive perceptions of peers. These results were corroborated by the findings of increased closeness among trainees following the training weekend.

The results from this study suggest that peer helper training significantly benefits the participants. Further studies will measure the effectiveness of the actual peer helper program in operation at the suburban high school. The results from this work in progress will provide an interpolative measure of the effectiveness of the peer helper training -- if the program is a success, at least part of the success can be attributed to the effectiveness of the training sessions. The impact of the training weekend on the perceived closeness of group members provides support for other programs that entail weekend excursions, such as teen retreats or encounter groups.

## References

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Appendix

This survey affects you! Please read it carefully. Results from this survey will be used to evaluate the effects of the training program! Your response is confidential and anonymous.

Read each question carefully. Write your responses with a #2 pencil, filling in the space on the answer sheet that matches your response. Although you may have seen some of the questions before, make every attempt to answer the questions as honestly as possible.

1. I am:
   A. Female B. Male

2. I am in grade:
   A. 8 B. 9 C. 10 D. 11

3. When I have a problem, I usually try to get help from:
   A. a friend
   B. a parent
   C. an adult at school (teacher or counselor)
   D. an adult outside of school (religious advisor, youth worker, neighbor, relative, family friend)

4. I have __ brothers and/or sisters (include stepbrothers/sisters):
   A. none (0)
   B. one (1)
   C. two (2)
   D. three or more

5. My parents are:
   A. married
   B. separated/divorced
   C. other (for example, if you stay with your aunt all the time)

Directions: For this section, please indicate the extent to which you agree with each statement, <u>strongly agree</u> (A), <u>agree</u> (B), <u>neutral</u> (C), <u>disagree</u> (D), or <u>strongly disagree</u> (E).

6. I feel that I could do a good job as a Peer Helper.

7. This training will help me to become an effective Peer Helper.

8. I did not care for some of the people at this training program, and I think it affected me in a bad way this weekend.

9. Although I may not have known or liked everyone here as a good friend, the training helped us grow closer and understand each other better.

10. I am looking forward to my role as a Peer Helper.

11. I truly hope I will be able to help my peers at PV next year by being trained this weekend (and at other training periods to come) to be a Peer Helper.

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